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SUBJECT: KARBALA: ARE THE KIDS ALRIGHT?

Classified By: Acting Deputy Political Counselor Michael Ma for reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

This is a PRT Karbala Reporting Cable

11. (C) Summary: Iraqis in and out of government have shared with PRT officers their concerns about Karbala's youth. Contacts describe Karbala's youth as relatively well-educated, increasingly distrustful of religious and tribal authority, and often difficult to reach in Sunni-Shia reconciliation efforts. Many young men are susceptible to joining criminal or extremist groups due to lack of work opportunities, lack of recreational opportunities, and increasing difficulty in raising dowry funds for marriage. PRT Karbala is working to address some of the problems facing Karbala's youth through a series of initiatives, including QRF projects to improve Karbala's schools and recreation centers, and economic aid projects to jumpstart local industry. End Summary.

Idle Hands

12. (SBU) When PRT convoys drive through Karbala, the streets are lined with happy children, impassive adults, and teens with faces that are quizzically alive. One can almost hear the internal questioning -- "should I regard this as a good thing or a bad thing?" With limited work and recreational opportunities, too many young men in Karbala are in the streets to ask the question. Youth unemployment and restlessness is largely a function of rural poverty. Provincial Council (PC) Member Mohsen al-Kenani told PRT officers on July 9 that farm families, hearing that police jobs in the cities pay well, encourage young men to seek such employment. Not all succeed, of course, and sometimes those rejected are too ashamed to return home. Such disheartened youths are ripe for recruitment by criminal gangs and even terrorist groups, he asserted, whose leaders are skilled at converting alienation into a thirst for vengeance. Al-Kenani, like other contacts, singled out Sadrist cells for trying to recruit young rural migrants.

13. (SBU) Sport is another means local officials have seized upon to positively engage the energies of teens. Karbala Director General for Youth Karim Abd al-Husayn al-Shiblawi told PRT officers on July 9 that the province has 13 youth centers, 70 fields, and 350 soccer clubs. Most of the centers are dilapidated and in need of refurbishment and equipment, the fields have no grass, and club players lack uniforms and shoes. (Note: We have written QRF proposals to help provide sporting equipment, computers and other materials for these centers. End Note.) Although the PC has made teen activities a high priority -- a recent debate over whether to build a mosque or a soccer pitch was decided in favor of the latter -- al-Shiblawi said that not enough money has been allocated toward this end. Late last year, a contractor began building a Karbala "sports city" that will include an Olympic-size pool, fields, and tennis and squash courts. But the funding ran out, al-Shiblawi said, and work has been on hold for more than three months.

¶4. (C) During conversations with PRT officers on July 10 and 20, Karbala Tribal Affairs Department Director Ali Husayn Abid Ali said the youth issue is the largest challenge facing the province's tribes. Poverty, unemployment, and sheer boredom are driving teens to rebel against traditional authority, he observed, and this is being handled by tribal sheikhs in several ways. Some recognize the seriousness of the situation and are doing their best to come up with ways for teens to play a greater role in decisions affecting their welfare, he said. Most, however, unfortunately are choosing to ignore the issue, despite an increase in criminality and violence among the tribes. A few cynically are attempting to direct the young men's energies outward in efforts to settle scores with rivals. According to Abid Ali, youthful rebelliousness is not confined to tribal males. Teen girls also are causing trouble, partly -- he theorized -- in response to media images and messages depicting the lives of less-restricted females elsewhere.

¶5. (C) The hold of religious authorities over Karbala's youth also has weakened. Muhammad Sadiq al-Hir, chairman of the provincial hotels and restaurants association, told PRT officers on July 18 that he believes "virtually 100 percent" of local teens hold clerics here in contempt. Al-Hir related an anecdote to emphasize the point: Despite the absence of a law prohibiting it, unmarried couples cannot check into a hotel together in Karbala. Why? Because the tourism police, at the behest of the religious establishment, routinely examines hotel registries. If the police find what they

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suspect to be an unmarried man and woman cohabitating, they force the hotel staff to produce the couple. They then interrogate the couple, confiscate their identification cards, and require them to appear at police headquarters the next day for further grilling, often with a religious figure present to make them "swear by Abbas" never to repeat the behavior. Such harassment, said al-Hir, is fueling the hatred of Karbala's youth toward what they see as efforts by the religious establishment to circumscribe their freedoms.

Toward Sunni-Shia Reconciliation

¶6. (SBU) Teens in Karbala can also be difficult to reach in efforts to promote Sunni-Shia reconciliation. Prominent Iraqi actor Hashim Salman, who stars in a weekly children's television show, told PRT officers on July 6 that he strives for a united Iraq and promotes reconciliation through his vocation. For example, he said, during a free magic show he presented to an audience of 3,000 Karbala schoolchildren (including some from the 16,000 internally displaced families Karbala education officials report reside in the province) the previous week, he used his monologue and various props to underscore that kids can be friends with other kids irrespective of their religious or ethnic backgrounds. (Note: The same message is promoted on billboards in the province featuring two boys, one a tribal Sunni and the other an urban Shia, holding hands. End note.) Parents in the province "get it," he believes, and are doing a good job inculcating their young children with the spirit of reconciliation. Local teens, however, are apt to reject messages billed by their elders as wholesome.

Relatively Good Schools

¶7. (SBU) Most of our contacts regard Karbala's rising generation as at least as capable as its predecessors. During a meeting with PRT officers on July 18, Governor Akeel Mahmoud al-Khazali noted that the province's schools long have ranked among Iraq's best. He added that, according to the results of recent tests, five of Iraq's top 10 middle

school students -- including the top student overall -- hailed from Karbala. Abbas al-Awdah, headmaster of Karbala's magnet high school, explained to PRT officers on July 27 that the city has long had excellent schools, partly due to its years as a haven for the persecuted Shia elite during the Saddam years. PC Member and Information Center Director Falah Hassan Ateya al-Yasi told PRT officers on July 21 that the youth here impress him as far more worldly and tech-savvy than he and his thirty-something peers, who "might as well have been living in remotest Africa" during the Saddam regime. (Note: In order to promote reconciliation, PRT is providing textbooks and materials to the Karbala magnet school and other high schools in the province. End Note.)

The Pursuit of Happiness

¶18. (C) Despite improving schools, many still see a bleak future for Karbala youth. Abid Ali had an especially dark assessment, predicting an unstable, nihilistic nation unless young people's basic needs -- including the ability to marry and establish households of their own -- are met. Reflecting general concern in Karbala about the inability of youths to afford to marry (the dowry or bride-price being the major expense), the PC this month selected 150 young men (from 372 applicants) to receive grants of 1 million dinars (USD 833) each to help defray wedding costs. Chairman Abd al-Al al-Yasiri, who rarely fails to take credit for anything that might boost his popularity, made the announcement on Karbala Radio on July 20. The grants will be bestowed at a ceremony to be held on July 31.

¶19. (C) Anecdotal information suggests that youths not fortunate enough to be on the receiving end of provincial largesse may be compensating chemically. Heroin and hashish are widely available here, according to law enforcement contacts, and -- as elsewhere in the world -- the primary users appear to be young people. Karbala's media have featured lurid stories detailing the downward spirals of teen junkies as well as reports about narcotics smugglers taken down in spectacular raids. We suspect many of the latter are concocted to burnish the public image of police commander MG Ra'd Shakir Jawdat, but we do not doubt that the regular influx of tourists and pilgrims here provides ample opportunities for both the purchase and sale of drugs.

Comment

¶10. (C) Like our interlocutors, we will continue to keep a close eye on Karbala's youth. The embodiment of the

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province's future, they are a bellwether in assessing progress toward reconciliation and reconstruction. Although heartened by the apparent anti-authoritarian spirit among local teens, we hope to help them see that democracy -- like a date palm -- requires careful tending if its fruits are to be enjoyed. End Comment.
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